

SHOULD THE NEGRO BE ENCOURAGED TO CULTURAL EQUALITY?

YES, says Mr. Alain Locke. White prejudice has branded Negroes as inferior and denied them political, economic, and social equality. Negro genius has turned, therefore, to the arts. Their culture is already widely acclaimed; but if this progress is to be permanent, White America can not continue to accept the Negro's gifts while denying the person of the giver. This means recognition of talented Negroes for free contacts with Whites as mutual advantage may dictate. Denied this, Negro genius faces the alternative of expatriation or racial strife.

NO, says Mr. Lotbrop Stoddard. Mr. Locke's plea is a veiled assault on the color line, — a tradition which asserts that our America is and shall remain a White America. The color line means, not necessarily that the Negro is racially inferior, but certainly that he is racially different. Abolish this line and we destroy the racial traits which give us unity, solidarity, security as a nation. In pride of race, the Negro should espouse a biracial system, creating his own social satisfactions.

I — THE HIGH COST OF PREJUDICE

ALAIN LOCKE

THE Negro question is too often put forward merely as the Negro question. It is just as much, and even more seriously, the question of democracy. The position of the Negro in American society is its one great outstanding anomaly. Instead of being solely the plight of an oppressed minority facing prejudice and proscription, it is the predicament of an obsessed majority confronted with increasing social dilemma and self-contradiction. No reasonable person expects a society to reform itself for the sake of abstract consistency; but nevertheless I believe there would be a profound change of social attitude toward the Negro if we were more generally aware of the high cost of prejudice. Enlightened self-interest would then operate to forestall the inevitable consequences of social short-sightedness. And if, instead of pleading by sentiment and Fourth of July rhetoric at the bar of democratic theory, the intelligent Negro would put his case in terms of the common-sense practicalities of the concrete situation; if instead of being the great suppliant at the feet of the nation, he would become the great critic and challenging analyst of our institutions, he would then confront America with

this dilemma of its own making and balance for self-interested judgment the alternatives of recognition and non-recognition.

Indeed, just as in the matter of the Negro's physical freedom the delay of gradual manumission forced the issue of summary emancipation, so in the matter of his larger freedom the denial of cultural recognition where it has been earned will sooner or later precipitate the more embarrassing issue of mass recognition on demand. There is a compound interest in such matters that an enlightened society ought not force subsequent generations to pay. Prejudice, moreover, as a wholesale generalization of social inferiority and cultural incapacity, — even granting that it was ever true or warrantable, — becomes, as a matter of course, more contrary to fact with every decade, — yes, with every day. The dilemmas of non-recognition become correspondingly deeper. Apart from the injustice and reactionary unwisdom, there is tragic irony and imminent social farce in the acceptance by "White America" of the Negro's cultural gifts while at the same time withholding cultural recognition, — the reward that all genius merits and even requires.

The orthodox social mind on this race issue suffers from the pathetic delusion that it can negate what it denies. It can, I admit, retard, but only at general social or net loss. In most cases it is putting itself in a more and more untenable position. Indeed, in the sweeping generalizations about the Negro's "place in society", by predicating wholesale the incapacity of the Negro group for higher cultural development, the issues of recognition have been sharpened and the ultimate dilemma brought closer. If, for instance, the general question had never been raised, Negro genius and talent could have been explained away as the exception (which it probably is for all groups) and expropriated without question by the dominant group. As it is, the Negro has been publicly dared, in prejudice so to speak, to produce the exceptional. Ethnic arrogance has blatantly called the world to referee the question. Negro genius has thus been made the champion of a staked issue and when it wins recognition (and who doubts the eventual recognition of genius?) it must have it not merely in its own right, but in the full force of its group representativeness and as the vindication of the controversy.

Mass proof of the Negro's capacities will slowly and eventually come, but by the circumstances of this general challenge, American opinion must meet the issue and recant its position much in

advance of any such general solution. That is why, I believe, the question of cultural recognition must be met and conceded by this present generation. In advance of the patiently plodding millions, the question raised can and must be settled in terms of the representative vindication of the exceptional few. For the asserted inferiority of the Negro does not pivot on the average man, — black or white, — and can not be settled by mass comparisons; as a challenge it must be fought out in terms of the exceptional man and the highest values of civilization. It is the price of prejudice that it should be.

This explains why, with only a little more than two generations of physical freedom, — as far as the masses go, — with his political freedom temporarily checked and frustrated, with educational and economic self-emancipation just beginning to gather mass headway and momentum, the Negro's talent and energy are turning with such force to the field of cultural competition. As his ambition, blocked or thwarted elsewhere, comes to this relatively free and unblockable avenue, it becomes apparent that what normally comes last in a people's development may very likely come first with the American Negro. Instead of being the by-product of his leisure and the fruit of his material success, his cultural development seems about to become a special channel of test and proof, an accepted vehicle of recognition.

In fact, the denial of equality, through the hard discipline it inflicts, has just this tendency to spur on and build up a moral and spiritual superiority. With the rush of long suppressed ambition and the urge of special motives, Negro talent to-day is pouring into its one free outlet in an endeavor to compete and qualify in terms of the highest acknowledged values of the White man's civilization, — in art and science, in creative and inventive contribution, — and through making such contributions, to demonstrate cultural capacity more effectively than it could be demonstrated by a high general average in the mere assimilation of American ways and standards. Cultural recognition, we may be sure, will not be prematurely conceded; it will be granted only when it is demonstrably inevitable; but to my way of thinking, by virtue of these peculiar conditions, it is less remote than political or economic equality, because less dependent upon the condition of the masses. In the light of the present attainment of the Negro of the younger generation, in cultural and artistic ex-

pression especially, and in the prospective social enlightenment of our talented tenth, I should say that cultural recognition of the Negro was imminent.

The continuance of the present attitude toward the Negro is in fact possible only as long as it is possible to take as most representative of the Negro his worst rather than his best. His greatest disadvantage is not that of inequality of condition but inequality of comparison. For successful peoples are rated, and rate themselves, in terms of their best. Racial and national prestige is, after all, the product of the exceptional few. So when Negro life begins to produce poets, artists, thinkers and to make creative contributions that must be recognized not only as outstanding but as nationally representative, the old attitudes become untenable. In American music and poetry and drama it is impossible to name the foremost talents without including some Negroes; and the promise of the rapid developments of this aspect of Negro achievement, especially as centered in the younger New York group, make the same very probable in the next few years for fiction and the fine arts generally. A Roland Hayes, a Paul Robeson, a Countee Cullen, a Langston Hughes or a Weldon Johnson shift the burden of proof from 'Rastus Jones and the general average; and the crux of the matter becomes the question of what position and recognition must be accorded the cultured and culture producing Negro in American society.

The greatest ground for hope in the situation is that by these developments on the upper levels of Negro life, the representative classes are appealed to, not so much in terms of something for the Negro, — something to be granted for his special interest, — but in terms of common interest and mutual gain. As has been repeatedly said recently, — and as is now being gradually realized in the current developments of cultural expression, — the Negro comes bearing gifts, and assumes for the first time the rôle of a contributor to joint and universal interests. It becomes then not solely a matter of recognizing the Negro, but more the question whether America can afford not to recognize in him those qualities upon which we must increasingly put a premium. Representative Negro opinion prefers to have the question put and settled upon this basis, prefers to point out that the typical contemporary demands of Negro life are, as it is aptly stated, "not for alms, but for opportunity." The Negro of to-day would rather have the competitive and rigidly selective democracy of the square deal

and equal opportunity than the unearned philanthropic democracy of paper rights and class legislation.

The force of this sane and inevitable position may at first affect only a few, — indeed, only the most enlightened and liberal sectors of our society, — but fortunately in such matters the few are yet the arbiters, and already the most enlightened and liberal elements are reaching out toward these exponents of Negro culture in warm and unreserved recognition not only of the product but of the individuals who are producing it. They, at least, may be expected to appreciate that mass recognition is not immediately in question, that it is a case of putting the premium upon the capable few, and thus of accelerating the “leveling up” processes in American society. In a recent discussion of this subject, John Haynes Holmes very aptly says: “The logic of social equality is a social system absolutely fluid, in which each man rises or falls according to his own specific gravity of character or merit. This will give you not all men of a certain type at a fixed level, but some men of every type at all levels.” It is this sort of social and cultural equality which contemporary Negro life merits and is demanding. It is this which in the light of the most recent trends of social attitude, Negro life seems in a fair way to gain. And it is this which is necessary if we are to maintain in American life that most essential of all democratic conditions, — an open career for talent.

The cultural recognition of the Negro, I admit, has its costs. But so also has non-recognition, and the situation should be pragmatically balanced in terms of these two costs. It merely fogs the issue when the creed of the slavocracy is sentimentally extended to classes and sections and situations that have no practical reason for holding to it, beyond the fact that it is the traditional way to think and feel. Even in circles that are so representative and stable that they should have no hysteria on the subject of race amalgamation, “no social equality,” — in short, “White Supremacy,” — is held to be the one reservation every typical White man is supposed to make and every typical Negro is expected to concede.

Cultural recognition, on the other hand, means the removal of wholesale social proscription and, therefore, the conscious scrapping of the mood and creed of “White Supremacy”. It means an open society instead of a closed ethnic shop. For what? For making possible free and unbiased contacts between the races on the

selective basis of common interests and mutual consent, in contrast with what prevails at present, — dictated relations of inequality based on caste psychology and class exploitation. It is predicated on new sorts of social contact, — less intimate in fact, however, than those it means to supplant. Indeed, instead of leaving society open at the bottom, as it now is, for the economic and sex exploitation of the weaker and less desirable elements of Negro life, it means the opening of society at the top for equal and self-respecting intercourse as warranted by mutual gain and common interests.

Before rejecting this new scheme of interracial contacts, let us take stock of the actual situation and the cost of the old traditional scheme of the relationship of black and white. The traditional opponent of social equality for the Negro, — the typical Negrophobe, — claims that race prejudice is primarily the instinct of race-preservation and its chief arm of maintenance. The logic of his attitude is just this: that person to person relations are the danger of White society. It is the very same man, however, whose social régime and life most depend upon close personal relations with Negroes, — in familiar and household relations at that, — and whose chief delight is to be instantly and widely familiar with Negroes provided he can protect sentimentally his caste pride and personal egotism, to which, as a matter of fact, such relations are the chief sustaining foil. It is this type of man who in open or clandestine relations, by the sex exploitation of the socially and economically unprotected Negro woman, has bred a social dilution which threatens at its weakest point the race integrity he boasts of maintaining and upholding.

In the light of this active contradiction of its own social creed by its own social practice, White orthodoxy on the race question becomes not a consistent creed of race superiority and inner conviction, but the social self-defense of a bad conscience, the hysterical ruse of a self-defeatist vice. It fumes about keeping society closed at the top and insists on keeping it viciously open at the bottom. It claims to eliminate social contact between the races, but actually promotes race mixing. Under conditions and habits such as these contradictions have bred, a rabidly "White America" can not refuse to recognize the Negro and long remain White. For it is pride rather than prejudice that keeps social groups intact; and normally with the Negro there would be more sentimental and practical motives for group cohesion under condi-

tions of social recognition than under those of social proscription, and less intermarriage under free association than miscegenation under forced social subserviency. The enlightened New South may be expected to see this. They already do. For these reasons as well as in the interest of general community reform and progress, they are gradually seeing the necessity for helping re-establish the group morale of the Negro.

Since we started out to be pragmatists rather than sentimentalists in the matter, let us see frankly if enlightened self-interest dictates the social recognition of the culturally advancing type of Negro. Let us remember that this is a complete reversal of the yet very prevalent the-Negro-is-all-right-in-his-place philosophy. Let us remember also that there is no way of putting a social premium upon a product and at the same time putting a social discount upon its active producers. Either they must be recognized in their particular persons as the accredited exponents of culture, or their output and its quality will be below par. The man who contributes to culture must fully participate in its best and most stimulating aspects. Negro genius to-day isn't to be expected to come in from the kitchen to entertain. Negro genius of the new generation consciously confronts only two alternatives, — front door recognition or voluntary expatriation. But let us admit, except, in a few most enlightened quarters, the existence of the old reactionary attitudes. Let us concede the dominant majority the power they temporarily have to withhold this sort of recognition and, by so doing, to retard considerably the development of the better elements of Negro life.

Black effort has gone forward and will still go forward almost as fast under the spur of non-recognition as under the wand of encouragement, — with a different course and temper, to be sure. Some genius will continue to be snuffed out, as in the past; considerably more will again be diverted to controversy and agitation and wastefully consumed in social friction. But some, in spite of everything, will break through to recognition. Genius is the most fluid social capital. Ideas are not subject to embargoes. Negro genius, — as witness Roland Hayes and Henry Tanner, — will bid for recognition abroad and will receive it. And in the self-involved dilemma of having repudiated at home, even as racially representative, what in the universal eye will stand as nationally representative, American public opinion can eventually do only one thing, — gracefully capitulate. Whitman and Poe

underwent the same experience, — so it isn't at bottom a race question.

But contemporary America does not wish to leave it to Europe to recognize American genius. And consequently the instant recognition of genius at home is to-day a very vital question for an America that realizes her cultural poverty in the midst of her material richness. For American self-esteem can not successfully subsist another generation upon the glitter of purely materialistic developments, upon the vaingloriousness of a gigantic civilization of utilities. With the quest for culture rapidly succeeding the quest for the dollar, America is not in a position to be restrictive or discriminatory in the field of cultural productiveness; and a group bearing cultural gifts can not be denied recognition, — even a Negro group. The cultural flowering of Negro talent, the attempt of the present generation to capitalize the race's spiritual creativeness, therefore comes most opportunely and takes a strategic position in the front alignments of contemporary American endeavor.

Apart, however, from this broad question that creative genius is the hardest and costliest thing to refuse to recognize, in a suppressed minority group it is the most dangerous thing to deny it free play and recognition. The balked intelligence of such a group, thrown back upon the repressed masses, invariably comes forward within another generation's time in the uglier form of radical leadership. Behind it rally the aroused masses and their harsh demands. As with the Jewish intellectuals of Russia, subverted social light may readily become revolutionary fire. I am not an alarmist; but I can see danger ahead in this persistent American lumping of the best with the worst in Negro life. Race war? Not exactly. Class war, more likely, — with the Negro group temper profoundly changed from its present patient amiability to social desperation, having in its ultimate disillusionment discovered that it has so little to lose.

Both as an American and as a Negro, I would so much prefer to see the black masses going gradually forward under the leadership of a recognized and representative and responsible élite than see a frustrated group of malcontents later hurl these masses at society in doubtful but desperate strife. The only way out of mob psychology and mass hysteria, — and they threaten now not from one side but from both, — is through the building up of the representative elements of Negro life; and this involves not merely the

Negro effort to improve and qualify, but the Caucasian will and vision to reward and recognize by putting at social premium not the worst, but the best.

For the present it seems that the interest in the cultural expression of Negro life is genuine, and that it heralds an almost revolutionary revaluation of the Negro. But that still remains to be seen definitely. Certainly this interest is rapidly spreading from the first accepted point of vital human contact in music and folk-lore to poetry, drama, fiction, and art very generally. Moreover, in enlightened circles the interest in the Negro's art is stimulating interest in the artist personally. Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, several of the younger poets have achieved, in addition to reputation, distinct personal popularity and success. Especially among the younger liberal and radical groups, and also to an extent in serious collegiate and youth movement groups, the work of the younger Negro artists is being taken as the new basis of approach for the sympathetic study and understanding of the Negro; and the dour, abstract-problem approach of the older generation is being laid aside. Occasionally direct efforts are made by such groups to cultivate person to person acquaintanceship with members of the more representative classes of the race.

Culturally significant beyond all this comes the eager adoption of Negro themes and material as a serious problem of artistic interpretation, even in the literature of the New South: Du Bose Heyward's *Porgy*, Julia Peterkin's *Green Thursday*, Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, — to mention some outstanding examples. This moving out of Negro currents into the main stream of contemporary art is a cultural recognition more significant even than the acceptance of the Negro artist, for it occurs as a reciprocal effect of the enlargement of vision which he has brought about. Moreover, it is achieved upon the basis of universality, a basis that must ultimately be achieved in all things; but one that may yet be, except in art, several generations' dip below our present horizons. So within the last few years this question has become something more than academic; we are actually confronted with a liberal array of Negro talent in active cultural expression and an almost parallel emergence of the disposition to recognize it.

It is to be hoped that general American opinion can be persuaded to follow its most enlightened segment in this direction of progressive recognition of the Negro. Beyond the fact that it is

not in the interests of democracy itself to allow an illiterate, unprogressive White man the conviction that he is better than the best Negro, it ought to be apparent that the most effective leverage upon the undesirable in the race situation is through the moral pressure that will come by recognizing the desirable. Otherwise even the sincerest criticism and the best of advice is spurned as unwarrantable persecution. If public opinion does change in this regard, and we hope it may, it will have discovered a new philosophy for pivoting a rapid and favorable shift in the social adjustment of the two races. By recognizing the talent and the representative types among Negroes, an easing and vindicating satisfaction can be carried down into the Negro masses, as well as the most quickening and stimulating sort of inspiration that could be given them. Their élite would then become symbols in advance of expected justice and of a peaceful eventual solution. They would be literally an investment in democracy.

The cutting edge of prejudice will thus have been safely blunted if American public opinion begins to scrap its unfair wholesale generalizations, and gives recognition where it is due. Besides affording a stimulus to Negro genius and increasing the general fund of common culture, much that is socially threatening for the future may be forestalled. For no prejudice is more fraught with social danger than that which outlives its causes and adds social insult to social injury. Negro effort, beginning to move under its own momentum, has reached a point where the vital question is not how much progress the Negro has made or is capable of making, but rather, how much of it will achieve recognition and be socially accredited. A pivotal adjustment of social attitudes is called for; and American society will have no more tactful and advantageous opportunity offered it than comes by way of the present generation's overture of a possible cultural recognition of Negro talent in its own intrinsic rights of accomplishment. Not only great satisfaction, but great social incentive can be created for the masses in the recognition of the outstanding few, — as group representative, however, and not with the reservations to which Negro talent of a previous generation had to submit, namely, of being regarded quite as a prodigy, a biological sport.

For the younger Negro artists and leaders of to-day are proudly race-conscious, and their work is in many cases frankly based on a conscious interpretation of their race life. They have, so to speak,

two audiences, and are in many cases strained to know upon which to concentrate. As artists, it would be best for them to face America and humanity at large. Otherwise, two alternatives, each entailing heavy and general social loss, would confront the talented Negro: either to march off to foreign fields and repeat for the whole American situation what has already tragically happened in the South, where the best and sturdiest have moved off and left an inert and almost leaderless mass to constitute a still heavier social drag and danger; or else to turn in narrowed and vindictive vision to the only course that will give him a chance and swing the hammer of mass action behind the cutting edge of genius.

